Key Questions, Planning, and Extended Writing

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A key question approach to the historical process can significantly improve pupil performance

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This article outlines the use of a key questions approach as the basis for planning history schemes and the contribution this might make to encouraging extended writing skills in Key Stage 3 pupils.

As a self-discoverer of a form of 'matrix planning' (the term I learnt later) in the early eighties, it was gratifying to see this approach being advocated by subject advisers at in-service training programmes. However, in time, I became increasingly dissatisfied with its limitations as a planning guide, particularly when presented to inexperienced teachers and non-specialists. Whilst it was a convenient way of recording the knowledge, skills, concepts, resources and teaching approaches pertinent to specific topics, it gave no indication as to how these ingredients inter-related with each other in a linear way to foster genuine enquiry. For instance, my own teaching still tended to dredge up knowledge without a clear sense of why it was important for the objectives of the lesson.

A hierarchy of open-ended oral questioning was an implicit tool within my own repertoire to focus pupils towards enquiry, so it seemed sensible to put this on a more systematic footing by identifying a key question for individual lessons. This proved useful in enabling work on concepts and skills to arise naturally from the investigation of historical knowledge. The questions were less satisfactory in providing a planning overview and often rested awkwardly within the matrix planning grids.

The idea of using key questions as the basis of unit planning was stimulated by a session run by Ian Dawson (1991) at a Historical Association Education Conference in Manchester. Dawson advocated the use of key questions on the following grounds:

- questions give unity and prevent history fragmenting into a series of one-off lessons;
- asking questions, suggesting answers and testing those answers may help generate enthusiasm towards historical enquiry;
- the approach of 'question — hypothesis — evidence — reconsider hypothesis' is good history which introduces pupils to the general historical process as well as its constituent skills, concepts and knowledge;
- key questions can be shaped to fit the attainment targets so that their development arises naturally from the work;
- open-ended questions allow pupils of different abilities to pursue the same question in different degrees of depth;
- questions allow the teacher to take control of content and use it for a purpose rather than being at the mercy of a check-list of events and topics which must be covered but in unspecified depth.

Attracted by the thrust of these arguments I set about applying a key question approach to the then recently devised Northern Ireland Programmes of Study for history, Key Stage 3 (DENI, 1991). Acknowledging the stated focus for the unit, and the principle of 'breadth, balance and coherence', I took the central themes and identified between one and four questions for each, reflecting what I perceived as the important historical issues appropriate to the age group. Thought was then given as to which attainment targets were dominant in each question. A check was made across the questions to ensure that each attainment target strand was receiving adequate coverage. If not, the key questions were reshaped accordingly. Figure 1 (opposite) displays an overview for the core 2 Study Unit.

Next, a teaching outline was created for each question using the headings: *Knowledge Focus*, *Objectives, Possible Teaching Approaches, Resources*, *Concepts* and *Cross curricular Themes.* An example from core 2 is given in Figure 2 (opposite).

Figure 2 then provided the basis for a series of steps through the question that would make up individual lessons. Sub-questions would arise, particularly in oral work, but the key question would remain the central organising tool.

The approach proved beneficial in practice:

- At the planning stage it allowed me to ensure that the knowledge included in my scheme was being used effectively and to jettison content that otherwise may have stifled enquiry. In turn this cleared space to enable skills and concepts relevant to the enquiry to be given proper prominence.
- Keeping the key question in the background of my thinking unquestionably helped focus my teaching and bring me back when I wandered.
- Each key question was introduced by it being written on the board and discussed. It remained there throughout the series of lessons for reference when a particular

Figure 1 **Core 2: Britain, Ireland and Europe from the late 16th to the early 18th century (original programme of study)**

THE FOCUS OF THIS UNIT IS ON THE CAUSES AND CONSEQUENCES OF RIVALRIES AND CONFLICTS WITHIN THE BRITISH ISLES AND EUROPE IN THE LATE 16TH AND 17TH CENTURY

Central themes	Key Questions	ATs
The causes of European rivalries and conflicts in the 16th century	1588: (The Girona) Why were Spain and England at war?	2a (perspectives in the past)
	Ireland: an obstacle to English expansion?	2a, 3 (evaluating evidence)
The experience of colonisation and plantation	Why plantation?	2a,1b (cause/consequence)
	Did the Ulster plantation achieve its objectives?	2b (interpretations of the past), 3
	What happened in 1641?	2b, 3
The causes and consequences of political and religious conflicts within the British Isles *c.* 1630-1655	Why did Charles I lose his head?	1b
	Was Cromwell a tyrant?	2b, 3
The causes and consequences of the Williamite Wars	How did people at the time view the Battle of the Boyne?	2a
	How had Ireland changed since 1600?	1a (change through time)

Figure 2 **Did the Ulster plantation achieve its objectives?**

Knowledge focus: The extent of rural and urban settlement of planters measured against the Revised Articles. Case studies of individual undertakers. The failure to attract enough settlers and the consequent use of Irish tenants. The extent to which the 'protection' clauses were fulfilled. The relative success of the unofficial plantation. Religious and cultural tensions between native Irish and planter. The modern legacy of the plantation.

Objectives: To evaluate the change and continuity in Ulster, pre- to post-plantation. (At 1a)
To assess the impact the events had on the attitudes and outlook of settler and native (At 2a).
To show understanding of why modern political and cultural organisations often place different interpretations on the significance of the plantation (At2b).

Possible teaching approaches: A group case study of the Strabane area. 1611, 1613, 1622 from primary sources (A class only); individual follow-up work. Examination of problems facing settlers by matching written and drawn sources. The treatment of the Irish through primary and secondary material. The urban impact through a trail around Coleraine. A written conclusion, measured against Revised Articles.

Resources: *The Ulster Plantation* (NI Public Records Office pack), 3 documents on Strabane. Second part of BBC video. *The Plantation; a shared experience* pp. 35-37, 38-40, 49-50, 51, source D. Departmental handout on the Treatment of the Irish, w/s on causes and consequences of the Irish perspective (lower band classes only). Coleraine trail booklet.

Specific concepts: Territory, cultural assimilation and conflict.

Education for Mutual Understanding/Cultural Heritage: To recognise the legacy of the plantation in the modern geographical, cultural and political make-up of Ulster. To recognise that its complexities make sweeping generalisations about cultural origins dangerous.

step was complete or when the enquiry was in danger of losing focus.

- Pupils, especially those of lower ability, found it daunting but with perseverance there is evidence that it channelled their thinking and most were capable of rising to the challenge.

- Dawson's 'hypothesis testing' model was of limited application, mainly because pupils without prior information of most topics came forward with very restricted ideas. Where it did prove useful was in examining contentious topics in Irish history, such as the 1641 rebellion or the Williamite Wars. Here, pupils often bring to the classroom a 'street' version of the past filtered by the contemporary perspective of their own cultural grouping. The questions, *What happened in 1641?* and *How did people at the time view the Battle of the Boyne?* were included to allow popular versions of the events to be challenged in the light of historical inquiry.

An additional benefit arose with regard to pupil's performance in extended writing. Like others, I was concerned by the fragmented nature of skills-based assessment techniques, and the consequent disadvantage this seemed to place on average and below average pupils when required to write extended answers at GCSE. I sought ways of encouraging pupils at Key Stage 3 to integrate the skills learnt and apply them to a coherent argument. The obvious end of unit task was to ask pupils to provide a summative response to the key questions posed.

Given the age group and ability levels of pupils (a non-grammar school in a selective system) and their inexperience with this type of task it was important that some structured stimulus was provided. This took a variety of forms. In the case of a question taken from another Study Unit, *Why did the Reformation spread?*, this was done by providing a diagram which outlined causes and suggested inter-relationships between them. In the core 3 Study Unit, on pre-partition Ireland, pupils, when presented with *What brought about Parnell's downfall?*, were given five factors and asked to rank them in importance as preparation for presenting an extended argument. In the example detailed below, taken from the core 2 unit, two key questions were merged: *Why Plantation?* and *Did the Ulster Plantation achieve its objectives?* To make the task accessible these were subdivided into four further questions.

- Why was the Ulster plantation introduced?
- What were its main features?
- How far were these followed through?
- What were the consequences of the plantation?

Pupils were asked to respond in continuous prose rather than break up their work into separate headings. Four hundred words were set as a minimum target. The responses were encouraging. The work generated a seriousness of purpose and most exceeded the word target without resort to repetition or irrelevance. Encouragingly, very few resorted to copying, or paraphrasing large chunks of textbooks, a feature so common in work done at home. Nearly all attempted to use knowledge to illustrate points and some combined it effectively to sustain argument, at least in one paragraph of their work. A few managed to sustain a consistent argument throughout. It is impractical to reproduce whole essays but the extracts below may give an indication of the standard of written response and the degree to which skills and concepts were integrated into the work. The unit scheme targeted 'cause and consequence' and 'perspectives in the past'. Pupils were also encouraged to bring in an 'evidence' dimension by drawing on the primary documentation which featured prominently in the teaching of the topic.

When dealing with 'cause', most answers moved beyond chronology to display an understanding of the concept of plantation. For many this was restricted to the issue of security:

> ... the plantation was introduced as a way of keeping the Irish under control. The English sent English and Scottish settlers into Ulster so they could keep an eye on things and if there was any sign of out-break or rebellion the settlers could warn English officials about it. Settlers were trained part-time soldiers so this must have scared the Irish that if they made a false move they could be in trouble. Undertakers who took on Irish tenants took precautions by building bawns around their houses to protect themselves from their tenants.

Others, however, brought a multi-faceted understanding to bear on the causation question:

> It was introduced because many people believed that to 'plant a nation' that would obey the English rule. If people were brought up the English way then they would start to believe that way themselves and that all English ways were correct. The English also wanted to make money out of the settlers by charging taxes that would then help the King.

When examining 'consequences' it was gratifying to find that even weaker pupils showed some grasp of ideas such as short- and long-term results, unexpected outcomes and comparative study:

> The consequences were that most of the things that were expected to happen didn't. The people were not trained as soldiers; most spent their time farming, so most things weren't completed. Not enough English came so the Scots overflowed their area and after a couple of years Armagh looked more like the lowlands in Scotland.

> Not all of the plantation areas worked out as well as the English had hoped for but still ended up the best results which was better than the surrender and regrant method of earlier. The English were able to get more

> people into the Ulster Plantation because the people thought the Virginia Plantation set up in Elizabeth I's reign in America was too far to travel ...

The 'perspectives' aspect often arose naturally as pupils got to grips with why certain events occurred, for example, when examining the plantation companies' quest for settlers:

> This was not going to be easy — they needed to persuade it was worth leaving home and that it would also be worth it in the long-term. The other problem and probably the most important was that they needed a lot of people to invest a lot of money in the idea.

This was even more clearly demonstrated when pupils discussed the impact the plantation was likely to have on the attitudes and actions of the native Irish:

> They wanted revenge against planters who had treated them badly by humiliating them and treating them like servants and slaves, and humiliating the old Gaelic way of life; these are the reasons for the 1641 rebellion.

Such responses moved easily into the realm of the Northern Ireland cross-curricular theme of Education for Mutual Understanding. The open-ended nature of the task sometimes indicated how difficult it is for young people to apply the objectivity sought in historical study when in the midst of a contemporary conflict:

> I think one of the most annoying things is the rebellion in 1641. I know how the Irish must have felt being under a lot of pressure having the land one day and then it being confiscated. Killing and robbing the English was no way of getting Ireland back. They could have went to the Crown and ask for some good land instead of swamps. I still disagree with the rebellion.

On the consequences of plantation one pupil wrote simply:

> One of the good things which still stands to this day in Northern Ireland is that the English rule over us.

For the key question approach to be fully successful in integrating the knowledge, skills and concepts learnt then a range of skills associated with handling evidence should be present. Deprived of specific evidence-based questioning, pupils' work only occasionally reflected this dimension. Several answers drew on documents for information and

Figure 3 **Study Unit 2: Rivalry and Conflict (revised programme of study)**

Focus: Pupils should have opportunities to consider some of the major social, economic and political changes that shaped the history of Ireland from the end of the 16th to the end of the 17th century, within a British and European context.

Broad Outlines	Key Questions	Dominant Concepts and Skills
The causes of European rivalries and conflicts in the 16th century	1588: Why were Spain and England at war?	Chronological awareness cause/consequence (reasons for/results of)
Crown and Parliament	Why did Charles I lose his head?	Chronological awareness cause/consequence
	Was Cromwell a tyrant? (experiences, motives, role and impact of a key personality)	Enquiry through evidence, analysing/evaluating sources and interpretations in historical context. Significance of ...
Ireland *c.*1600-1700	Plantation: bringing good government to a 'barbarous country'?	Identifying/analysing characteristic features of the period, overflow in Britain, Europe and World context
	What happened in 1641? (causes, short- and long-term impact of a key event)	Cause/consequence, analysing/interpreting sources, identifying beliefs/attitudes of period
	The Boyne: an Irish, British or a European battle?	Overview in Irish, British, European and world context. Consideration of how/why events have been interpreted differently
	How had Ireland changed since 1600? (continuity/change in aspects of a society over a period)	Placing continuity/change in a chronological framework

illustration and some managed to display higher order skills. Two pupils challenged the reliability of sources:

> The pamphlet also shows two paragraphs trying to get Tradesmen, Smiths, Weavers, Masons, carpenters to go to the Plantation by telling them they can live freely and feed their families more nourishment and of how it will secure them a place in heaven and of how they will be millionaires when they go there. But all this is just talk, the people could even end up worse off than they already were ...

... and two recognised the dangers of generalising from a case study:

> The plantation was probably least successful in the Strabane area as there were large amounts of land and a lot of buildings and not enough people to occupy all of the houses but some places have been more successful and therefore you couldn't judge the plantation on one particular area, you have to look at all the areas used in the plantation to see how successful it really was. Some documents were exaggerated to pretend that the plantation was doing well ...

Overall, I feel the essay responses give validity to teaching through key questions. The class illustrated above was of varied ability but well motivated. Other under-motivated, and less capable groups struggled initially but also showed a refreshingly committed attitude, and an improved standard of writing when taught and assessed in this manner. This suggests that by concentrating on key questions pupils gain the confidence to express their thinking in continuous prose without resort to plagiarising the textbook. They, also, begin to integrate the various learned elements of the historical process.

The work illustrated arose from the original NI history Programme of Study which has recently been reviewed (DENI, 1996). Content has been reduced by adopting a broad sweep/case study approach to each Study Unit, and by replacing the artificiality of the attainment targets with an approach which recognises the inter-relationship of knowledge, skills and concepts within the historical process. Figure 1 might easily be restructured, as shown in Figure 3, to provide both questions which address general trends and those which focus on in-depth issues (in italics). The attainment target column might be adapted to indicate the predominant Historical Skills and Concepts (the equivalent of the Key Elements in England) inherent in each question.

That done, the key question approach outlined above is in sympathy with the more holistic view of the historical process embraced in the review. In tandem with readily available word-processing facilities in the history classroom it can provide a means of translating planning into effective classroom enquiry, and significantly improve pupil performance in extended writing.

Bibliography

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